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From the Selected Works of Mary-Jane Rubenstein

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Review of Julia Kristeva, *This
Incredible Need to Believe*
(Columbia, 2009)

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One also wonders whether Janz distinguishes his view too strongly from the classical tradition. After all, do not Augustine, Thomas, Calvin, and even Rahner think that sin primarily affects desire, and that grace primarily heals desire?

"The Command of Grace" is a high-level, tightly argued, robustly Lutheran account of how one should think of the relation of reason and revelation and of divine causality. It merits the sustained attention it demands from anyone interested in its themes.

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This Incredible Need to Believe by Julia Kristeva, trans. Beverly Bie Brahic (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009), xvi + 115 pp.

Julia Kristeva's work has long been a great resource for theologians and religious studies scholars. Her exacting analysis has helped us to think through the ambivalence at the heart of love; the problem of melancholy; and the excluded, feminized conditions of possibility of cultural-linguistic systems. It was therefore with considerable excitement that I approached *This Incredible Need to Believe*, Kristeva's first single-authored "book" explicitly devoted to "religion." More precisely, this slim volume is a collection of interviews, short essays, and a Lenten lecture delivered at the Cathedral of Notre Dame—all focused in one way or another upon what Kristeva calls the "need to believe" at the foundation of human experience. Kristeva's aim in these pieces is to bring psychoanalytic insights to bear upon an increasingly violent global stage, in which "the nihilistic certitude of some encounters the fundamentalist exaltation of others" (p. vii). Her hope is that by analyzing the "prereligious need to believe," psychoanalysis might offer a transformative response to "religions' . . . fundamentalist off-course drift," as well as "the dead ends of secularized societies" (p. 12).

Precisely because the author is so respected and the stakes are so high, it is deeply disappointing to find this book riddled as it is with broad generalizations, unexplained confluents, self-referential vacuums, and gross mischaracterizations of its primary target—which, it turns out, is neither uncritical dogmatism nor uncritical secularism, but Islam. Islam, Kristeva argues, lacks the theo-psychic infrastructure to support critical thinking, and therefore produces a "barbarism founded on the denial of malaise" (p. 97). Christianity, by contrast, faces up to malaise as fully as possible, sublimating it into literature, art, music, and love. This can be seen not only in Christianity's explicitly (Catholic) devotional forms, but also in its secularized offspring: namely humanism, the social sciences, and psychoanalysis. For all of the rigor and sophistication we have come to expect from Kristeva, then, the argumentative core of this book is that the problem with the world today is Islam, and the solution is Christianity.

Of course, psychoanalytically speaking, the problem is never the problem, and so Kristeva entreats us to look beyond these traditions to their psychic roots in "the need to believe." Tracing *credo* back to the Sanskrit *kredh-dah/srad-dhâ*, Kristeva ties belief to confidence and confidence to credit: to believe is to invest. While belief is defined,

however, "religion" is not. These pieces assume "religion" to be self-evident, and to be a matter of *belief*, which for Kristeva means "to give one's heart, one's vital force in expectation of a reward" (p. 4). This reward comes in two "prereligious" forms in the psychoanalytic narrative. The first is the "oceanic feeling" to which Freud famously had no access—the ego's ecstatic dissolution into the universe, which recalls her infantile union with the maternal body (pp. 7–8). The second is the child's "primary identification" with the father, whose recognition individuates her by pulling her out of the mystic-maternal sea (p. 10). It is this confidence between father and child that marks her entrance into language; in short, belief is the foundation of all speech and all knowledge.

For Kristeva, Christianity ensures this transition thanks to its unmatched emphasis "upon an absolute love for this loving Father . . . 'I love because I am loved, therefore I am,' could be the believer's syllogism" (p. 49). Of course, Kristeva has not forgotten her ambivalence; she knows that the commandment to love gives way to "unstoppable impulsive violence" between the father and child. But Christianity's "genius" is precisely to face up to this violence, taking it to its fullest extreme in order to transform it. If, as Freud has argued, societies are founded upon the incest taboo ("A Child is Being Beaten") and the murder of the father (*Totem and Taboo*), Christianity delivers a beaten child who *is* the punishing father. For this reason, Kristeva argues, "this scenario has the advantage of *both* relieving the incestuous guilt that weighs upon the *desire* for the sovereign Father and encouraging virile identification . . . with this tortured man" (p. 58). The "virile identification" enabled by this Christian "advantage" is accomplished through ascetic "masochism" (p. 58) and through masochism's relief and reward: the Eucharist. When the Christian consumes the flesh and blood of the God she has killed, the "unstoppable impulsive violence" between her and God is suspended. God takes on "the attributes of a good and nurturing mother" (p. 50), and so does the Christian who incorporates Her. The love between the two of them can now be expressed in works of joy: art, poetry, music, literature. In short, by torturing its father-son god to death and commending the believer's identification with him, Christianity "displaces" its incestuous and murderous rage, ultimately sublimating it into culture.

The "problem" with Islam, then, is that it lacks the theological imperative to produce such culture. Kristeva reaches this conclusion in response to her interviewer's shockingly ignorant question: "Does Islam share in this [sublimating] trend of monotheism? Where does its warlike spirit come from? Might Allah be closer to the God of Aristotle than God the creator?" Disappointingly, Kristeva criticizes neither the form nor the assumptions of these questions; rather, she affirms them: "You are correct," she begins. "Many specialist [sic] speak of the 'resemblances' between Allah and the God of Aristotle, whom we know is defined as the 'Prime Unmoved Mover' on the edge of the universe (*Physics* 8.10) . . . some would place him at 'the source' of Islamic radicalization, right to robotlike obedience and terror!" (p. 65). Without citing any such "specialists," Kristeva proceeds to question this conflation—in order to defend *Aristotle*. "Let us remember, at least, that the Aristotelian divine is much more complex than people would have it . . . this prime mover moves the sublunary world like a desirable 'love object' (*Metaphysics* λ7) . . . We are very far, as we see, from the omnipotence of the Islamic legislator who exacts obedience" (p. 65). At this point, a hierarchy begins to open up: at the bottom is the unloving "Islamic legislator," who falls short of the "kindly God" of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, who "in no way resembles the loving God of the Christians" (p. 65), clearly the best God of all. Yet, Kristeva adds, Thomas Aquinas integrated Aristotle's Prime Mover into "the living and loving God" (p. 65). So the Prime Mover is better than Allah, but not nearly as loving as the Christian God, who nonetheless redeems the Prime Mover by incorporating him. And Aristotle, at the end of the day, belongs to Christians—not to the Muslim scholars who

preserved and developed him throughout the medieval period, upon whom Aquinas relied so heavily.

At this point, Kristeva explains to her interviewer that the real issue with Islam is not Aristotle, but rather "the role of the father" (p. 66). In the Jewish tradition, she explains, Abraham "spares Isaac," suspending the death drive until the purported collective "murder" of Moses. Christ, in this supercessionist retelling, "accomplish[es] the destiny of Abraham" by dying and returning to life (p. 66). So, as Freud wrote in *Moses and Monotheism*, the problem with "the Mohammedan religion" (a phrase Kristeva uses without scare-quotes) is that it "lacks the deepening produced, in the core of Judaism, by the murder perpetuated against the religion's founding figure, a murder that Christianity is, on the other hand, willing to admit" (p. 66). In other words, *Islam is homicidal because it lacks a foundational deicide*.

Because it fails to murder him, Islam is stuck in perpetual obedience to a hyperphallic father. This, for Kristeva, marks "the principal difference" between Islam and the other two Abrahamic traditions. At this point, we find the completed hierarchy of gods, from the bottom up: "The bond between the believer and Islamic divine authority constitutes a bond tantamount to a juridical pact—which is quite different from the bond between a paternal Creator whose role is to *elect* (in Judaism, whose spirit, however legalistic, does not in the least suppress the creationist value that summons God's chosen people to the work of reflection and interrogation) or to *love* (in Christianity, even in the test of abandonment and the passion" (p. 68). Here we can see the traditional Christian critique of Judaism's "legalism" displaced onto Islam, which occupies the lowest level of the interreligious ranks. Kristeva vindicates Judaism of the charge of legalism because choiceness encourages critical thought (although we never learn *how*). Lastly, Christianity turns Judaism's critique into love by completing the sadistic fantasy, turning violence into joy into culture. Meanwhile Islam, still *bound* in its "juridical pact," forecloses all critical thought, barring the path to productive sublimation.

Because of Islam's non-deicidal rigidity, Kristeva declares that dialogue *within* the tradition is as futile as dialogue *with* it. These "distinctive features of Islam," she writes, "make an Islamic theo-logy improbable if not impossible, and similarly, any 'discussion' between Sunnis and Shiites, not to mention with the other two monotheisms" (p. 68). It is not the *theos* that Islam lacks, but the *logos*; no thinking, no (already Christianized) *word* can come out of this tradition thanks to its theological inadequacy. So Muslims cannot talk to themselves, their counterparts, or anyone else, and this "desertification of thought" leads inexorably to "fundamentalist totalitarianism" (p. 74). It will perhaps come as no surprise that not a single Muslim scholar, theologian, sacred text, or commentary is directly engaged in this book. This wholesale refusal to recognize the theo-philosophical heritage of Islam has the baffling and stultifying effects of 1) displacing all religiously sanctioned violence onto Muslims, 2) rendering futile any reasoned response to such violence ("they" won't listen anyway, because they can't), and 3) obscuring nearly every one of its causes. One is left believing that the fires in the French *banlieues*, the protests in Denmark, the IEDs in Afghanistan and Iraq have nothing to do with military, historic, political, or economic factors; they are simply the function of a vast Muslim father-complex.

If Islam can only generate violence, "Christianity's difference" is its ability to sublimate it. "Christ leads to Mozart," Kristeva proclaims, "Christianity refines suffering into joy. Listen to the 'Miserere Nobis' of the *Mass in C Minor*," she suggests. "The sacrifice resolves itself into serenity, then ecstasy. What an unexpected filiation! Allah's madmen, among others, should give this some thought" (p. 84). Against "Allah's madmen," Kristeva appeals to a cultured "we," the inheritors of "Greco-Judeo-Christianity," asking "us" to claim "*this civilization, ours*," and affirm its genius (pp. 76, 97; emphasis added). In particular, she calls upon her "we" to own Chris-

tianity's suffering/dead God and its secular outcroppings, which alone can transform the death-drive unraveling "our" civilization.

Of course, Kristeva admits, Christianity's injunction to suffer with the suffering God is often misread as a commendation of suffering. But more productively interpreted, Christian "com-passion" can be seen as a call to "moral solidarity with vulnerable humankind. . . . Christian humanism, when it does not lock itself into redemptive suffering, prepares the believer to acknowledge this vulnerability in himself, the better to share the political struggles of those who suffer" (p. 92). Here, at last, is a productive ethical stance. But it leaves one wishing this "Christian humanism" had allowed Kristeva to count, among "those who suffer," the vilified and massacred Muslims of "our" *laïcité* and decade-long "war on terror," or perhaps to have the "com-passion" to understand Muslim theology, rather than simply declare it impossible.

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Knowledge in Later Islamic Philosophy: Mulla Sadra on Existence, Intellect, and Intuition by Ibrahim Kalin (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), xxii + 315 pp.

The Persian philosopher, Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi, known as Mulla Sadra (980/1572-1050/1640), epitomizes seven centuries of Islamic intellectual tradition as he strives "to dovetail revealed knowledge (the Qur'an), philosophical demonstration, and realized or mystical knowledge." Ibrahim Kalin expounds a rich Hellenic commentary tradition to show how Mulla Sadra's quest "spans the entire spectrum of classical and medieval philosophy from existence and causality to self-knowledge and knowledge of God." By discerning the enduring yet inscrutable face of the creator in the gradations of created existence exhibited in diverse ways of knowing, the searching of which opens us to appreciate distinct modes of existence, Mulla Sadra roots epistemology in metaphysics. That is the thesis which Ibrahim Kalin develops in a masterful way, comparing and contrasting Mulla Sadra's metaphysical epistemology with (mostly modern) western inquires. He would have found a more amenable companion for Mulla Sadra in Aquinas, yet focusing on current philosophy allows him to introduce contemporary inquirers to this Persian thinker in a manner more familiar to them. Yet few of us have heard of Mulla Sadra simply because our potted "history of philosophy" has standardly had al-Ghazali so effectively refuting Averroës as to spell the end of philosophical inquiry in Islam, for modernist western thinkers had credited Averroës with the properly "rationalist" stance authentic philosophy demands. In short, what did not fit modern western parameters could hardly be philosophy!

Once modernism ceased to prevail, however, we became open to other readings of Islamic culture. Kalin's mentor, Sayyed Hossein Nasr, has long been exploring these out of his Iranian heritage, showing how Islamic philosophy returned east from Andalusia, where a fresh set of protagonists sought ways to relate revelation with reason rather than needing to oppose them (see my "Islamic Philosophical Theology and the West," *Islamochristiana* Vol. 33 [2007], pp. 75-90). On this more accurate